Yale Talk: Conversations with Peter Salovey

Episode 16: Making Music at Yale

[Music – recording of Ryan Tani ’21MMA, conducting the Yale Philharmonia performing Rodion Shchedrin’s *Carmen* Suite (after Bizet, 1967), Movement IX: “Torero”]

**Peter Salovey:** Hello, everyone! I’m Peter Salovey, and welcome to Yale Talk. You’ve just been just listening to Ryan Tani conducting the Yale Philharmonia’s performance of Movement IX: “Torero” of the *Carmen Suite* by Shchedrin. Ryan is one of my guests today, along with Florrie Marshall. We’ll hear her performing at the end of the podcast.

Ryan and Florrie are both students at the Yale School of Music. Florrie is a violist, and she received her master’s degree from the Yale School of Music in 2018 and is now a doctoral candidate. Ryan is completing his master of musical arts degree at Yale, and he is a tenor and a conductor and the resident conductor of the New Music New Haven series.

As some of you know, music is my hobby. It’s a passion for me, and I have played the upright bass as a member of a band, “The Professors of Bluegrass,” for decades now. I love listening to all kinds of music, and I have been lucky enough to enjoy many wonderful concerts at Yale—in Woolsey Hall, Sprague Hall, and in other places around campus, too. My guests know these spaces well.

So, Ryan, Florrie: thank you for joining me on Yale Talk.

**Florrie Marshall:**  Thank you so much for having us.

**Ryan Tani:** Pleasure to be here.

**Peter:** You know, I am always curious about how people find their way to careers, particularly careers in music. And I’d be really interested in how you got started. Were you musical prodigies as children? Was it in your families? How did how did you get started playing and performing?

**Florrie:** So my journey into music, it didn’t take that long to get there. I was born into a musical family. My dad builds and repairs guitars for a living, based out of Norfolk, Virginia. And both of his parents were violinists and violists, performers and teachers. My grandfather’s sister was also a violinist. So she’s now ninety-five, living in Virginia Beach, Virginia. She took over my studies when my grandfather passed when I was four. So to say that it’s kind of in my blood is a good way of saying it.

**Peter:** That’s multiple generations of musicians.

**Florrie:** Yes. A funny connection, too, is even further back by one generation. So that would be my great-grandmother, who was based in Norfolk, Virginia, has a connection with Elizabeth Parisot, who’s on faculty here at the Yale School of Music. And Elizabeth Parisot is also from Norfolk, Virginia. And her very first piano teacher was a colleague and good friend of my great-grandmother’s, who was also a piano teacher at that time.

**Peter:** That’s a nice connection to the Yale School of Music, a family connection.

**Florrie:** Yes. And then I’d say when I was a young teenager, I really discovered how much I loved practicing and loved performing. And then when I was 17, I was actually preparing for auditions for undergraduate programs, and I was in a car accident and I had a back injury and wasn’t able to play for three or four months at all. And as I was reintroduced to the instrument in increments as small as five minutes a day with the help of my great-aunt, I really discovered how much I loved music, and I really couldn’t live without performing, and the collaboration that I got through youth orchestras and things like that. So that was a real defining moment for me.

**Peter:** You don’t know what you got till it’s gone.

**Peter:** How about you Ryan? How did you find your way into music?

**Ryan:** Well, I’ve been extraordinarily lucky that music has been a part of my life as long as I can remember. And this is sort of taken many forms over the years. Neither of my parents are musicians.

I begged my parents to let me play the violin. They started me off with a cardboard violin. And I guess they determined that I was dedicated enough to it. [Laughter] So they continued me on that journey. And the violin sort of stuck with me as my instrument of choice. But later in life, I found my own instrument, my voice, and through singing, I found myself really able to express myself and be my truest and most honest sense of self, and I discovered the potential of music to tell stories and to express emotions and feelings and thoughts in ways that, for me, I was never really able to with words, and I guess that’s the long and short of it. And the conducting came a little bit later and that’s sort my beginnings.

**Peter:** Obviously, on voice, you’re classically trained, and the Yale School of Music emphasizes opera and such, but do you also sing popular music, too?

**Ryan:** You know, I think the closest I’ve gotten to that is I sang a good amount of *a cappella* when I was in college with some friends. And we would do arrangements. I would write some arrangements of things. And I really enjoyed that. My fiancée is a jazz singer. She does that for fun. So she and I will sort of play for each other from time to time and do some standards. But really, I would never put that on stage. That’s just for me.

**Peter:** A perfectionist like all musicians. It’s funny because I know you’re a tenor and luring you into a career in bluegrass music might be made more easily by the fact that tenors are very valued in bluegrass music because, you know, it’s the high lonesome sound and many of the songs are tuned way up and people love singing in G, A, B-flat, up, up. The tenor singer often has that piercing sound that cuts through a noisy banjo player standing next to you.

**Ryan:** Well, if this conducting thing doesn’t work out, I have your email. Maybe you can get me a gig.

**Peter:** Exactly. You just let me know. [laughter]

So, the arts are such a special strength at Yale. We really, I believe, are the only university with four schools of the arts—music, drama, art, architecture—but also the arts are infused throughout Yale. Undergraduates, no matter what they’re interested in, always seem to have a special focus on the arts too. Might be extracurricular, but it’s such a big part of Yale. And so I’d be very interested in how connecting the arts to the rest of Yale plays out in the work you do or in experiences you’ve had at Yale. Why don’t we start again with you, Florrie.

**Florrie:** Sure, I agree. I think this campus is very musical in all senses of the word, and very artistic. Back in 2017, I applied for an award through CCAM, the Center for Collaborative Arts and Media. And I received a small stipend to pursue a project interdisciplinarily, which basically was the building of an app that each person and an audience could download and have on their phone. And it basically was a color wheel and allowed each individual audience member to input like a color or a shape that they could say was a reflection of their listening experience. And then in real time, the aggregate of all of those entries was displayed in a moving picture in color on a background behind a performer. So it was kind of an immersive experience, allowed people to kind of visually see the collective effect of music on an audience. That was really interesting. I got to collaborate across the university for that.

Another really meaningful collaboration that I was a part of – October 2018 was what I now consider my soft launch of a nonprofit that I formed, formally in 2019, called The Sound Bridges International. The collaboration was with what is now called Grace Hopper College, and it was around the story of the name change. The college was formerly known as Calhoun College. Throughout that whole process, for me, that was the first time I had ever experienced live protests in my life coming from the Tidewater area of Virginia. So during that whole time, I just kept thinking to myself, what can I actually do for my community with my music? Because that’s what I’m good at. That’s my wheelhouse. How can I add something to the conversation in a productive and compassionate way? So I started dreaming up this concert that I wanted to do. The whole idea behind the concert was not to be inflammatory or to take one side or the other, but really to provide a space for people to contemplate and to just explore their own emotions around the subject. I collaborated with some of my very good friends, and we took Mendelssohn’s F-Minor quartet. There’s a lot of angst and a lot of storminess in that piece, a lot of nostalgia and a lot of feelings that I felt were reflected in the community at that time. So we performed that piece. And then the other part of the concert, which is really cool, was the commission that I was able to fund through an award that I got through the School of Music. And I was able to commission a new piece for string quartet by composer Liliya Ugay, who is also a doctoral candidate at the School of Music currently. And that piece she entitled *Grace Hopper*. And so in addition to being a complement to the Mendelssohn on the program, it was in three movements and each movement took an aspect of Grace Hopper’s life and work, especially with computers and math. As the story goes, Grace Hopper discovered the first bug in the computer, which was an actual moth that flew into the computer room.

**Peter:** That’s the story they tell. [Laughter]

**Florrie:** Yes. So in one of the movements, you can actually hear the little moths flying around, which is cool.

**Peter:** That’s a nice story, because there you are in the School of Music, but bringing your music to largely an undergraduate setting and particularly in Grace Hopper College and marking a historic situation there, with lots of room for reflection and contemplation.

I know you also bring your music to the schools in New Haven, and I’ll come back to that in a minute and we’ll talk more about that. But I want to catch Ryan on the same question. How do you transcend boundaries across the university with your music?

**Ryan:** Last year some friends, and some from the production design program actually and some from the music school and elsewhere, we came together to put on a sort of multimedia performance space. It was in the residential area of Yale. It involved a lot of electronics and visuals to create a really unique experience for everyone involved—audience and performers alike. And what I really love about cross-disciplinary collaboration in this way—whether it be music and dance or music and visuals or theater or spoken word, et cetera—is the opportunity it creates to allow people to share and absorb thoughts and feelings in really unique ways. And as a member of that space, both as a musician and an audience, one can have a really individual connection with the different facets of that experience because the music and visuals—and this is also what I love about opera, too—is that all of the elements really enrich each other and change the context of each other. It’s one of those things that the sum is greater than the parts, right, that the end product is something that’s meaningful in many different ways.

I think that cross-collaboration is an essential part of the music-making process because—I say this as a musician and this is true of most musicians who dedicate their lives to the craft—they spend so much of their time in a box, in a room, perfecting their craft. And I think it’s through those shared experiences of cross-collaboration that we really get to the heart of what we’re trying to do and communicating what we want to communicate.

**Peter:** That certainly makes sense to me, and I want to take it even a step further beyond cross-collaborations on the Yale campus, and to take it into the city of New Haven, and in a minute, the city of Baltimore.

Florrie, tell us a little bit about your work with a very special partnership that the Yale School of Music has. The Yale College Class of 1957 gave a gift to the school that makes possible a Music in the Schools Initiative in New Haven supported by the Yale School of Music, and I know you work in that initiative. Tell us a little bit about it

**Florrie:** Yeah, so this program has kind of two aspects to it, one pre-COVID and one post-COVID, which both, I think, are highly innovative and very valuable to the larger New Haven community. So pre-COVID, this initiative allows the School of Music to have some of its students as teaching artists that go into schools during the school year, basically help the music programs that are already there in the public school systems, and then also I remember going in and helping actually teach the class while all the kids were together. And then there would be little breakout points where you could take one or two students at a time and work with them individually to help them improve their skills.

**Florrie:** And then another part of that was the Morse Summer [Music] Academy, which over the summer, there’s a month-long program for all of those children and students from the public schools of New Haven come together every day from, I don’t know, eight to four, eight to five, and work on chamber music, some orchestra music, and then also individual instruction. So that provides what otherwise might be some boring and lazy summer days for these students to get together with their friends and to make music together.

So post-COVID this year has been really interesting for the program. The lessons that normally would take place inside of the public school have transitioned online, as many aspects of our lives have. And last summer, Morse Academy went all online. And I know there were some new components that were added. There were some composers from the School of Music that were brought in. So some of the students were composing pieces for the first time in their lives. They were performing and also learning how to use technology, from a musical standpoint and how to record themselves with audio and with video, and how to submit those things.

**Peter:** It’s wonderful, and the technology has gotten a little bit better, right, over the course of COVID for recording music, particularly when it’s done in ensemble. Certainly some of the things that you can find on the Internet are amazing. Something is lost, also, I would imagine.

**Florrie:** Yes. I think for most of us, it removed the live element because, of course, Internet latency is the bottom line for what prevents us from being able to do live collaborations over the Internet. But there are lots of different programs that we’ve been using to just record or, for instance, Ryan would send a conducting track and then everybody would record their parts accordingly and then submit and have a producer put everything together. But, yes, absolutely, I think the technology is improved and also we’ve improved at using the technology.

**Peter:** And let’s talk about Baltimore, Ryan. You are the director of something called the Occasional Symphony. Tell us about that.

**Ryan:** Thank you for asking. One of one of my most meaningful experiences as a conductor has been my association with the Occasional Symphony. The Occasional Symphony is a grassroots orchestra, based in Baltimore, comprised mostly of alumni from the Peabody Institute, where I did my first master’s degree in conducting, and also local professional musicians who may or may not be working full-time in the musical realm or have done their musical training and then have gone on to do other things. And so there’s a mixture of musical talent in the Baltimore community that is extraordinarily rich and comes from different perspectives, and then we all come together and create music maybe three or four times a year for three or four concerts.

The great thing about our group is that we don’t really have a singular home. We find non-traditional venues in the city, and we put on concerts that fit the theme or the experience of being in that space. And this year is no different. We moved to a virtual space for our 2021 season and sort of found our way doing that. The other central mission of the orchestra is to celebrate occasions, occasions to make music together, to celebrate holidays, special kinds of commemorative events. So our flagship concert is a Halloween show that we do every year at a collectively managed space, and we screen a silent horror film. And I’m quite proud of this project that we do every year. We commission local Baltimore-based composers to write for it, and then we fill in the rest with sort of core repertoire and create this mosaic of music that’s accompanying the silent film, and we screen this and everybody comes in costume. I come in costume. We have a live orchestra that comes in costume. And it’s an extraordinary event, and I’ve been fortunate enough to be part of four of them now, this year was the fourth virtual edition of this. I’m also quite proud of how the orchestra has been able to serve both Baltimore audiences and Baltimore artists and musicians. It’s really a unique organization.

**Peter:** Sounds a little bit like what Yale College students do on Halloween night with the Yale symphony, and these are wonderful traditions in Baltimore and on campus.

Have you noticed a way in which the technology has changed or improved or musicians have learned to adapt to it over the course of COVID?

**Ryan:** It’s a really great question, and I got a sort of surge of enthusiasm when Florrie was talking about how technology has been an educational platform for young people to explore new facets of music-making because they’re able to explore that in the context of technology, which is a really unique thing for our generation, and people can build on those skills and determine that that’s something they want to do and go deeper in that; there’s certainly a need for it these days. That’s really, really exciting, and wonderful, as musicians who are not technology experts who are sort of getting into it. There have been a number of platforms that I’ve seen come up. I’ve seen platforms where people are able to submit tracks online and it’s automatically synched somehow, and that’s really wonderful, but just the other day I was recording for a virtual choir doing for an Easter service, and we’re doing the “Hallelujah Chorus,” of course, and you know, recording this, you know, high tenor part from home in…[chuckling], without an entire choir around, and it’s a, it’s a big part, you know, you feel that part of the joy of singing these things is being with other musicians around you, and not having that has been certainly a challenge for sure. But I think that musicians everywhere have adjusted to the virtual platform in really agile ways—by necessity, for survival, if nothing else.

As a conductor, being in this COVID time, a lot of my learning process and my joy also comes from being isolated at home and being able to sit down with the score and a pencil and do that, and I’ve made the most of it.

**Florrie:** Kind of to add on to what Ryan was saying: I think there are two things in particular that stand out to me from COVID times. One is, because of technology, to be in contact with and to collaborate with people from all over the globe. Early on in the pandemic, there was a group of School of Music alumni, including myself, we thought, well, this really sucks. There are no concerts. And for our friends and peers and colleagues that are depending on concerts for their livelihoods, all of this has just been evaporated overnight. So we got together and through my non-profit platform, were able to produce and present a couple of concerts and a series that we called “Home to Home.” And we contacted YSM alumni from across the globe, several in Europe, some in Asia, and from all over the U.S. And we were able to produce three concerts in a virtual manner. We presented twenty-five YSM alums and raised over $5,000 to help them with their bills and to supplement their lost income. So in that respect, I may not have collaborated with or even talk to some of those colleagues so soon after school, if it hadn’t been for this unique situation. So in that respect, it’s really exciting to kind of understand how easy it is to reach people across the globe.

The other part of COVID that I think—I’m starting to feel it a lot these days—part of it may be the weather, too—but I think the lack of in-person and live performances has created this real anticipation for its return. And I think everybody is really itching to be able to go to their first in-person performance and experience that again. That anticipation is very real and it’s growing. So that’s very exciting. And I think, talking with presenters and fellow performers, that itch hopefully will be able to blossom in the coming months.

I think for all of its negative things that COVID has brought on us, I think it’s forced us to be become entrepreneurial and innovative in how we collaborate, but also it’s—like you said at the very beginning of the podcast—you never know how much you love something until it’s gone. I think that’s a very real sentiment for us.

**Peter:** Speaking of collaboration and being entrepreneurial, tells us what Sound Bridges is?

**Florrie:** Sound Bridges International Company is a non-profit organization that I founded in 2019. The concept for it was born out of a class that I was taking with Dean Robert Blocker the year before, and in that class—it was very small, intimate setting, and he really pushed us to think about why we do what we do, and what is the larger purpose as musicians in community. So that really got me thinking. So it was along that timeline when the name change at Grace Hopper College was going on, and I just felt that a lot of times people see classical music as something old and outdated and irrelevant and kind of out of touch, but actually, if you read and you really delve into the history of when these pieces were written, these canonical pieces in the repertoire, actually the emotions and the social situations that were going on are so similar to things that we experience today. And I think that gets lost in translation somehow. Classical concerts seem to have this stuffiness about them, and they can seem out of touch, but it’s quite the opposite. And all an audience needs is for someone to help shine some light on the story behind these pieces for them to be become really relevant again. So one of the things that I wanted to do was to create concerts with that kind of historical inspiration, with an old piece, but also to create new pieces. So one of the pillars of the organization is commissioning.

**Peter:** That’s the bridge.

**Florrie:** Exactly. That’s one of them. That’s one of them. So the tagline for the organization is “building bridges of cultural understanding through music and the performing arts.” It includes performing music, but it also could include dance, has included poetry and things like that just to bring the musical experience alive.

But part of the commissioning aspect is I really wanted, as an artist, to feel that I was contributing something to the history that was unfolding around me. And by commissioning a piece that would be set now in the repertoire for string quartets by Liliya, the composer I mentioned earlier, we now have an artistic response to what our community has gone through around this particular experience.

And so over the next decade, I hope to have a lot of commissions that are responding to different things around the country. Whether they’re kind of swept up in turmoil or not, I think is not really the point. It’s just to have an artistic response. And, ten years from now to look back and say, oh, we’ve got this library, the small collection of artistic responses. For me, that has a lot of staying power.

Then another component of the Sound Bridges is conversations, so I’m really glad to be actually on this end of the interviewing process, for once, but I’ve got a good collection going of interviews that I conducted with my biggest musical mentors. And of course, the list of people that I still have to interview is growing every day, but I’ve been lucky to talk with Peter Oundjian, who’s our principal conductor here at the Yale School of Music, also David Lang, the Pulitzer Prize-winning composer who also teaches here. And in those conversations, I’m really asking the same questions that I’ve been asking myself: What is it that drives us to do what we do? What kind of impact are we actually having on a human level in these artistic experiences and, asking for their advice or what they think people in my generation can be doing to prepare for the future. So that collection is published on the Sounds Bridges website as well. Those are kind of the main pillars at this point.

**Peter:** So I think we’re appreciative of those bridges in this time of COVID, where in some ways our world has shrunk. And you’re trying to do the opposite here by building these multiple bridges.

Well, we’re coming to the end of our podcast, but I would be remiss not to ask you each: what’s next? What is next for you when you graduate from the School of Music and continue your careers? How do you think about a post-Yale life?

**Ryan:** It’s so interesting that the emergence from a program as wonderful as Yale is coming also at a time where we’re sort of emerging from this COVID time into something new. And as Florrie says, this gravity of all of us coming together again, renewed, and a new sense of purpose, I think has extraordinary opportunity for the arts and also responsibility for the arts.

What I loved first about singing is the communal music-making aspect of it. What I love about it is it’s a sort of microcosm of society, not in the sense that a conductor is a dictator. [Laughter] Far from it, but rather in the sense that everybody has to listen to each other and to compromise and give everything they have to achieving a communal goal. And over COVID, and over my time at Yale, I’ve come to really think critically about my passion for this. As Florrie says, I think that’s just incredibly important for artists these days to really ask these critical questions. And, for me, I think that this time is a moment of greatest possibility for American orchestras and choirs and ensembles. I know it’s a very difficult thing to say, ensembles are in dire straits, especially in the United States these days. But, right now, I also think that’s because our repertoire so narrow, the message that we have wanted to say has been so narrow because we claim a sort of universality in this music.

I think that we have an opportunity and an obligation to reshape the classical music world, to uplift new voices and to reimagine the collaborative art form. And ultimately for me, I have a sort of renewed sense of purpose to create opportunities for young people. Going back to what we were talking earlier about, our musical roots, I’ve had such formative experiences, having such wonderful mentors and teachers, opportunities to try, to risk and fail, to succeed, through technology to meet new people who I wouldn’t have had the opportunity to meet in the past, meet people who are equally passionate about making music together and forming real connections with each other. I am excited to imbue this sense of purpose for myself in teaching and in sharing stories and experiences with audiences, young musicians and creating what I think is the truest sense of the word “community.”

**Peter:**  Wonderful aspiration for a post-Yale life. How about you, Florrie? What happens when you leave Yale?

**Florrie:** That’s a great question. I’m currently, through the Sound Bridges, working on another commission. It’s currently being written by the same composers [as] the first one for string quartet, by Lilya Ugay, and this one is actually for solo viola. And I really wanted to explore through this commission, experiences that are special and monumental for females, and actually brought to mind a piece that Robert Schumann wrote for his wife Clara. It was a song cycle called The Life and Loves of a Woman. Each song in the cycle depicts, beautifully and intimately and tenderly, different stages of a woman’s life—so carrying a child, getting married, in the reverse order, of course, back then, all of these things. And then finally, the last one is about death and arriving at that stage of one’s life. So I wanted to pair a work for solo viola that could be done on the same program with the song cycle. I’ve actually just completed a transcription of the song cycle for viola and piano from voice and piano. So that is definitely on the near horizon for me. I think long-term, of course, this degree, you spent two years on campus doing coursework and taking lessons, playing an orchestra and chamber music and all of those wonderful things. And then there’s a three-year post-residential component in which the faculty help as much as they can, but really expect you to take on your career and to start to really establish yourself in the field as an expert in our areas. And so I’m really looking forward to exploring different ways of doing that. I think one of the things I’m also very passionate about is teaching. I have a private studio of fifteen students right now. It’s a lot to juggle with the demands of the program, but I love every minute of it. So I could envision creating some sort of residency where I have my students involved with maybe my former teachers and bringing together multiple generations of musicians together to present concerts and things like that. And, yeah, just exploring what the future holds for us as musicians.

**Peter:**  Wonderful—more bridges.

**Florrie:** Yes. More bridges. Exactly. Yes, exactly. [Laughter] So I think the future is very, very bright for us. And I’m very excited to see what we do, and also coming from such an amazing environment and such a rich history of alums from the School of Music, I’m going to be very happy to be joining the ranks with so many wonderful professional musicians and seeing what these kinds of Yale connections and relationships bring to fruition in the future.

**Peter:** Well, I have to say, Ryan and Florrie, this has been an incredibly stimulating conversation for me, and I’m sure, for our listeners as well. I want to thank you both for taking your time to share your experiences with all of us. It’s been a wonderful conversation.

We’re always looking for ways to share Yale with the world, and there are so many ways to do that. There are many ways to enjoy performances by the Yale School of Music, their students, their faculty, no matter where one is. And I encourage you to visit the school’s website, at music.yale.edu, music.yale.edu, for a list of events and to find performance live streams. You can also follow the School of Music on Instagram or Facebook, and there are many news items, interviews, and videos on those platforms.

Today, we will finish with Florrie Marshall performing the first movement of the *Rhapsody-Concerto* by Martinů.

To friends and members of the Yale community, thank you for joining me for Yale Talk. Until our next conversation, best wishes and take care.

[Music – recording of Florrie Marshall ’18MM ’26DMA performing Bohuslav Martinů’s *Rhapsody-Concerto*, H.337, Movement I, on viola.]